

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

Sponsored by the Virginia Green Industry Council

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You will have it made in the shade with these beautiful trees by Jim May

Trees are the basic elements of any landscape plan. Because they set the stage for the rest of your landscape, consider them first when planning. The type used and their location determine to a great extent what other types of plant materials are appropriate.

Selection of the proper tree species is a very important first step when considering planting a tree. Selecting the wrong plant can be a waste of money when the plant fails to survive, or it can be the beginning of years of problems when it fails to thrive. Also, it is very important to consider the mature size of a tree when planting. That cute little oak tree may become a liability if planted too close to the house or under overhead utility wires.

While there are no species of trees that are so superior to others that they could be called “the best,” there are some that are better than others. There are differences of opinion as to which tree is better in a situation from a design standpoint; however, I tend to look at them from a purely functional point of view.

There are hundreds of different types of shade trees that are suitable for planting in Virginia. Our climate is incredibly diverse as it ranges from the colder mountains of the southwest part of the state to the much warmer coastal areas. Few states in the country have 3 hardiness zones, but we do and they range from zones 6 to 8. Shop for trees that will survive and thrive in your hardiness zone.

Maples are good trees to consider in all parts of the state. They transplant easily, grow quickly, have beautiful fall color and some have interesting bark that provides winter interest. You can't go wrong with a red maple (*Acer rubrum*). While the species grows to 60 feet, there are cultivars that were developed for their smaller size and reliable fall color such as ‘October Glory’, and ‘Red Sunset’, both of which reach only 45 feet at maturity. The hybrid cultivar ‘Armstrong’ has a narrow or columnar canopy and is suitable for smaller spaces.

Sugar maple (*A. saccharum*) is one of our most beautiful native trees. It grows to 75 feet and can overwhelm small yards, but its fall color is spectacular. There are also columnar cultivars.

Norway maple (*A. platinoïdes*) is another very large tree. However, its fall color is better some years than others and its root system can make mowing difficult. The cultivar ‘Crimson King’ is a popular Norway maple because of its dark red leaves.

While there are dozens of species of maples suitable for planting, a few are not recommended because of their weak wood or “trashy habits”, including silver maple (*A. saccharinum*) and box elder (*A. negundo*).

Oaks are the quintessential shade trees. Some of the best for the northern and western part of the state include scarlet oak (*Quercus coccinea*), pin oak (*Q. palustris*), willow oak (*Q. phellos*), northern red oak (*Q. rubra*) and shumard oak (*Q. shumardii*). There is also a columnar English oak commercially available (*Q. robur* 'Fastigiata'), which makes an interesting landscape statement.

When you get over to the eastern part of the state, many trees that will not survive in colder areas thrive here. Live oak (*Q. virginiana*), laurel oak (*Q. hemisphaerica*) and willow oak (*Q. phellos*) are good examples of warmer climate oak trees. Check with local nurseries for species that do well in your area.

Fast-growing used to be synonymous with weak-wooded but there are a few desirable shade trees that grow quite quickly. The green ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*) and white ash (*F. americana*) have compound leaves and a coarse texture when they shed. Shop for seedless varieties such as 'Marshall's Seedless' or 'Patmore'. The native tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), or tulip-poplar, needs a deep, fertile, moist soil to really thrive. It gets very large and should be planted only where there is plenty of space.

If you want a birch tree, consider a river birch (*Betula nigra*) and resist the temptation to plant the white, or paperbark birch (*B. papyrifera*). The river birch tolerates Virginia's hot summers, while the white birch gets stressed and becomes susceptible to the bronze birch borer, an insect which kills trees quickly. There are other white birches that are more resistant to the borer, including *B. platyphylla* 'Whitespire' and *B. utilis* 'Jacquemontii'. Check with your favorite nursery for recommendations. The river birch cultivar 'Heritage' has a light salmon-colored bark that peels (exfoliates) and is quite beautiful year-round.

Other trees with interesting bark include the London planetree (*Platanus x acerfolia*), a hybrid of the native sycamore. Unlike the sycamore, it does not produce fruit and lots of messy leaves and twigs. The lacebark elm (*Ulmus parvifolia*), is a fine-textured, fast-growing tree with exfoliating bark that is quite striking when the tree matures. Japanese zelkova (*Zelkova serrata*) is another elm-like tree with a vase shape, fine texture and interesting bark. The muscle-like smooth, gray, fluted bark of the American hornbeam (*Carpinus caroliniana*) lends it another name, ironwood. While not typically available in nurseries, ironwood and others such as the common persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*), Kentucky coffeetree (*Gymnocladus kentuckea*) and American hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*) are native shade trees with interesting bark definitely worth seeking out. Lastly, the ginkgo tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) has beautiful bark, an interesting growth habit and spectacular fall color. Be sure to seek out only male ginkgos, due to the stinky fruit produced by the female.

There are many other great trees to consider. We are fortunate to have dozens of excellent nurseries in Virginia with knowledgeable staffs. Check with them for other recommendations.

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.